Gravy

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ABOUT GRAVY

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The Cooks Who GIGGLE

by Bill Smith

I HAVE A MERRY KITCHEN. I realize that this may seem unusual. We have all seen or at least heard about professional kitchens that are decidedly unmerry. But I have had the good fortune to have hired people who giggle. Mostly they've come from Mexico.

We're a Southern restaurant by definition, so as a rule I don't put Mexican items on the menu, but Latino cooking has begun to insinuate itself all over North Carolina. No one escapes completely. For instance, almost nobody says that the collards are too spicy anymore. That was a common complaint when I came to work here in the early nineties. So what else is new on the menu?

Well, there are now lots of good Mexican restaurants, run by Mexicans here. These restaurants are full of gavachos–that means Americanos. The word gringo has gone out of fashion. (Black and white folks are usually there in equal numbers, so a general term is needed.)

In the last year we have seen an absolute swarm of taco trucks in neighboring Carrboro, where zoning is less difficult than here in Chapel Hill. Everyone likes tamales. (In fact, one of the cooking classes that I teach most often includes those big banana leaf wrapped

tamales from Oaxaca.) Everyone knows what jicama is and there are always several choices of fresh chiles at the grocery store. Pozole is liable to be the soupe du jour at the local brew pub. My mother sends me out for tres leches cake when I'm home because there is a pastilleria within walking distance of her house. The effects are both obvious and subtle.

Twenty years ago I don't think I even knew anyone from Mexico. Now half of my best friends are from there.

Back when I began working at Crook's Corner, there were only a few Mexican dishwashers on the staff. They were pleasant men who kept to themselves mostly and who giggled a lot among themselves. Interaction with the Anglo members of the staff was minimal simply because of language. Sometimes they would come to parties. Sometimes they would bring food to work and let the rest of us try it. And of course we all immediately learned each other's dirty words, but mostly we parted ways after work.

Now their community is well established here. Many of them have worked their way up through the ranks in my kitchen. We switch languages there without giving it much thought. Twenty years ago I don't think I even knew anyone from Mexico. Now half of my best friends are from there.

This isn't my first encounter with an immigrant work force. In the seventies, we received a large number of Vietnamese people here, who were being helped to resettle by the churches. I was in a different restaurant then, but the delightful friendships were very much the same. The new foods, equally eye opening. I have always seen this as an opportunity. I like to say that you can wash dishes in any language, but you can do lots of other things too. Learn lessons, for instance.

I have learned more about what is important and what isn't from these guys than from any group of people I can name. They work hard and if they can find time, they play hard. When they work hard it is often at menial jobs, but a menial job at ten dollars an hour can mean unprecedented advancement to someone used to making ten dollars a week. Some people, especially in this economy, see a threat. This is a change, certainly, but I see it as a good one. Things never go back to the way they were. I'm looking forward to more good food and good music with good friends. I will perhaps learn to play a little harder as well.

Bill Smith's merry kitchen is located at Crook's Corner in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. He is the author of Seasoned in the South: Recipes from Crook's Corner and from Home.

THE CROWN PRINCE OF GUA BAO:

An Interview with Eddie Huang of Baohaus

by Sara Camp Arnold

AT THE FORK-TENDER AGE of twenty-seven, Eddie Huang has established himself as the crown prince of *gua bao,* Taiwanese steamed bun sandwiches. Filled with pork belly, steak, or tofu, "red-cooked" in a Mandarin style, Huang garnishes bao with cilantro and peanuts, and sells them at Baohaus, his shotgun counter-service restaurant on New York City's Lower East Side.

The son of Taiwanese immigrants, Huang grew up in Northern Virginia and Central Florida. In advance of the 13th Southern Foodways Symposium, where he will be one of the guest chefs, we asked him a few questions.

1. How did you get into cooking?

I just followed my mom around the kitchen, even at two or three years old, copying what she did. When I got older, she'd call me to start recipes that she'd come home and finish. It wasn't until college that I got to cook for myself and strayed from her recipes.

2. You offer boiled peanuts on the menu at Baohaus; to what extent does your Southern upbringing influence your cuisine?

Definitely the flavors. I have a heavier hand than most Chinese chefs, but Taiwanese cooks have an island flavor profile that's heavy with pork fat, dried shrimp, and bamboo—and that really fits what I learned down South. Outside Taiwanese and Chinese food, my passion is barbecue, hands down. When I moved to New York, I brought my vertical Brinkman smoker with me and smoked turkey legs on my apartment balcony. But people downstairs started heckling me, saying I was country, so I stopped!

3. What do you love most about cooking and running a restaurant? What is the hardest part?

My favorite part of cooking is how one recipe comes out so many different ways. My brother and I were just joking that everyone at Baohaus follows the same recipes, but no matter what, it tastes different. It's a strange phenomenon; everyone just has a different flavor they bring. I don't know how it happens, but it does. I love seeing how things will come out—it's always surprising.

The hardest part, for me, is not responding to bloggers, "Yelpers," etc. They flat-out lie a lot, compare apples to oranges, and really speak without knowing anything about what happens at

a restaurant. Especially with Taiwanese/Chinese food, people are misinformed... People are constantly comparing *gua bao* to *char siu bao* [Cantonese pork buns], which are entirely different items. I just wish people would take the time to explore.

4. If you weren't cooking, what do you think you would be doing?

Well, I was doing stand-up comedy until I decided to open the restaurant. I've always been opinionated. Either comedy or journalism—I did a lot of music and sports writing, too.

5. How do gua bao compare to Southern-style barbecue sandwiches?

They compare favorably, especially mine. I use cherry cola to braise my pork and beef, so that's something that people like doing down South, too. Southern food and Taiwanese food have a similarity in that both cuisines understand how to introduce sugar into savory dishes without a hitch.

6. You've been known to marinate your beef in sorghum liquor. Is this a Taiwanese or a Southern influence?

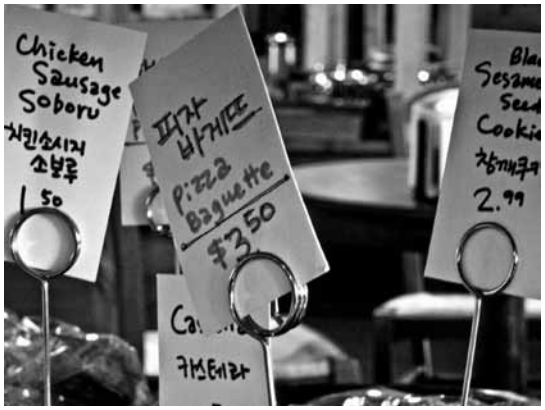
This is something I just came up with myself after making bourbon barbecue sauce. I saw the technique where people flambé whiskey for bourbon barbecue sauces and transferred the technique to "red cooking," where no one is doing that.

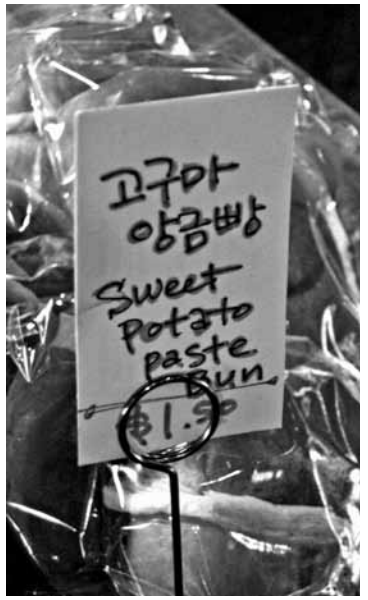
7. Tell us about your next project, Xiao Ye, opening in June, also in Manhattan.

Xiao Ye is inspired by night markets and late-night food in Taiwan. The atmosphere will be raucous, the food is meant to be eaten in small plates, shared, and there's a lot of exploration. I give people a lot of variety to choose from, and they build their own crazy late-night meal.

Sara Camp Arnold, former associate editor of The Oxford American, *is pursuing a masters in folklore at UNC-Chapel Hill.*

Café Mam





Fusing Cuisines & Communities

by Ashley Hall

"ME, I DON'T NEED COUNTRY BOUNDARIES OR RACE BOUNDARIES," says Steve Sung, owner of Café Maum, a three-year-old Korean bakery and café on Buford Highway, in the suburbs north of Atlanta. "We are all the same."

It's 9:30 on a Friday morning, and the large room is half-full with hungry diners. The guests file through a buffet line, piling their plates with French toast and cantaloupe, glistening baby carrots, and broccoli and tofu stir-fry. A sincere Asian-Fusion breakfast.

Café Maum (pronounced "mom") is a quaint incubator of integration. Korean ingredients meet European techniques. Traditional Western forms like buns, cookies, and loaves are topped, filled, and glazed with savory Eastern favorites, like red beans, green beans, sweet potatoes, and chestnuts. The décor is French Country, but the signage is in Korean. You can order a shot of espresso or a bowl of *pot bing su* (shaved ice with red beans). All can be had in a nondescript storefront, set in a strip mall in north Georgia.

Café Maum isn't the only bakery of its kind. In Georgia alone, there are 15 or so locations of Korean bakery chains like White Windmill and Mozart Bakery. Each has its devotees.

Buford Highway, also known as Georgia Route 13, is a place of pilgrimage for eaters seeking the new immigrant cuisine. The stretch of highway that runs between Chamblee and Duluth boasts hundreds of restaurants and markets offering a diverse assemblage of dishes from Korean, Japanese, Salvadoran, and Mexican cooks—to name just a few.

Like many Buford Highway business owners, Steve is not out to preserve sacred traditions. He's quick to blur cultural boundaries.

I find a blurry happiness in a sweet potato paste roll. The fist-sized bun looks and tastes a lot like a country-club style yeast roll. Airy, chewy, buttery, but not at all sweet. With a core of sweet potato goo running through the center. The flavors are delicate. The portion is filling.

Café Maum is spacious. The room is golden and awash in natural light. The wooden tables and chairs are custom made. There is a working stone fireplace. A rendering of the Eiffel Tower hangs over the station where you add milk to your coffee. It's an amiable suburban version of a Parisian café.

A three-tiered table in the center of the room is piled high with house-made baguettes, chestnut bread, red bean paste buns, potato and egg *koroke* (savory stuffed pastry), butter cookies, as well as multi-grain and white sandwich breads. The pristinely decorated cakes are

housed in a glass case. So are lovingly plated slices of tiramisu, which Steve says is the café's bestseller.

Steve, a bespectacled 50 year old, speaks with intensity and moves quickly between the kitchen and the dining room. His uniform is a T-shirt, ball cap, and windbreaker, each imprinted with the Café Maum logo.

Steve emigrated from Korea in 1987 and has lived in Atlanta since 1992. He has thrived as a small business owner and real-estate developer. His wife and café co-owner, Sydnie Lim, designed Maum's interior. The couple has three children. The oldest two attend Georgia Tech, just a few miles south of the bakery.

"Maum" is a philosophical term that references a person's heart, mind, and soul, their essence. "It is what we each have in common no matter our background..."

When he opened Café Maum in 2007, Steve hired bakers from Korea. In his homeland, Steve says, the Western pastry tradition won its way into Asian hearts, as five-star hotels in Seoul hired French pastry chefs to indulge Western tourists.

There is not much bread in the Korean diet, says Gene Lee, proprietor of the blog *Eat, Drink, Man*. Raised in the mountains of eastern Tennessee, Gene grew up eating traditional Korean food prepared by his immigrant parents.

"In Korean food, the rice is your starch. Dessert was fruit. If you look at pictures from my parents' weddings or parents' friends' weddings, you never saw a centerpiece like a cake. Just big tables of food and bowls of fruit."

At Café Maum, Steve has changed the game. "We wanted to create a nice community meeting place," Steve says. Located in a strip mall-heavy section of an already strip mall-heavy city, historically Buford Highway had few places to mingle. A French-style café offered the right environment for the immigrant population to commune and socialize.

"Maum" is a philosophical term that references a person's heart, mind, and soul, their essence. "It is what we each have in common no matter our background, says Steve. "They don't all know

each other," he says of his customers. "But we are all the same. They come here to connect."

Despite their higher aspirations, Steve and Sydnie live the harsh realities of entrepreneurship. Steve says they recently added buffets in hopes of drumming up more business.

"I lost a lot of money," he says matter-of-factly. In the last three years, he has watched several of his businesses and real estate investments evaporate. As he tells it, he and his family have lost a couple of small fortunes. Only the two locations of the bakery remain.

"Now my wife and my children say, 'Dad, you can do it again.' And I say, 'I'm not sure,' and they say, 'Yes, we know you can.'"

He shrugs. "So I start one more time. But it's not easy."

Ashley Hall is a former newspaper woman and long-time peddler of fine French wine. A Birmingham, Alabama, native, she's now a loyal resident of Atlanta, Georgia.

Waiter, There's a Hair...

by Gillian Clark

"THERE IS A HAIR IN MY FOOD." If you're in the food business, those are seven words you never want to hear. The plate comes back, the hair prominently protruding high above the sauce, more noticeable than the parsley.

And I feel like an idiot for not seeing it before sending it to my hungry customer. The server brings the plate to me, that hair throbbing like a thumb just whacked by a hammer.

When it comes back to the kitchen I am compelled to pull the hair off the plate. A bit of mashed potato still clings to it. It always needs to be examined, studied. The plate doesn't go to the dish room until I've conducted my investigation.

This usually means that I let the hair hang from the tip of my knife and look it over under the brighter and harsher light of the kitchen. There are times it's been a fiber from a fluffy sweater. On these occasions it is bright and blue and scraggly—not human at all. There are times when it's been a pet hair carried on a jacket sleeve, or the man-made thread scratched loose from a hair weave, too long to be real.

Sometimes it is wavy and blonde. I scan the room to see where that hair might have come from. Did it float across the dining room from table 12, carried by the cool HVAC breeze, and decide the potatoes at the next table made for a perfect final resting spot?

No matter. My role is to hang my head in shame. My hair or not. How could I be so reckless? I am the nurse who drops the baby. The prison guard who lets the inmate grab his gun.

Sometimes, when I find a hair, I'm not filled with revulsion. Sometimes, when I find a hair, my gag reflex doesn't trigger.

Alone in my kitchen, in the early morning, when the produce comes off the truck, I'm the first to open the case of mangoes, the box of sugar snap peas, the wooden crate of ramps smelling sweet and oniony. I'm washing thirty two lemons for lemonade, when I notice the long brown hair swirling down the drain. When I lift the lid off the box of freckled green and sunrise-colored mangoes I spy a thick black strand, straight and heavy.

That hair is a messenger. Trying to tell me something. There was a person here. A woman who worries about her children. A guy who hopes he's going to be done in time to catch the ball game. Someone stood over this crate of ramps in West Virginia and, before he twisted it shut with wire, he left me a reminder that, no matter how clean and sanitized and microwaveably convenient we want our food to be, a real live human being, a hairy human being, has to pull that head of lettuce out of the ground.

Gillian Clark, Washington, D.C.-based chef and owner of The General Store and Post Office Tavern, is at work on a second book, The Colorado Kitchen Cookbook*, and a collection of short pieces and recipes based upon her radio essays on NPR's* Weekend Edition.

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